



Khamenei's War

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Executive Summary

* On 14 May, Ayatollah Khamenei determined the course of the current crisis and issued directives to the authorities. There will be neither war nor negotiations with the US.

* Khamenei and official Tehran have every reason to be confident given the reaction of the US, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to the series of Iran-sponsored violent provocations against their oil infrastructure. Ultimately, even if for only a short time, Iran demonstrated it can shut down the export of oil from the entire Arabian Peninsula. Hence, as Iran is getting more audacious and assertive, the likelihood of a clash with US forces is growing.

* Comes 15 May, Tehran is emboldened not only in its ability to confront the US militarily, but also to withstand political-economic US pressure. Tehran knows that Russia and China decided to give Iran "guarantees" that they "will not allow Iran to be destroyed."

* On the night of 15 May, Iran's most senior commanders suddenly asserted in closed meetings with senior officers that Iran is ready for an imminent fateful war with the US. Meanwhile, Qods Force Commander Soleimani travels around Iraq and Syria, consulting with his commanders and preparing them for the next phase of the historic surge of Iran.

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Analysis

On 14 May, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei determined the course of the current crisis involving the US and issued directives to the pertinent authorities. Khamenei convened a closed meeting with “the heads of power branches”, key senior officers and officials, jurists and Majlis members. He discussed and analyzed the current situation, and then outlined Tehran’s next moves. Iran will do its utmost to avoid war with the US while relentlessly pursuing its ascent as a prominent regional power. Throughout, there will be no further negotiations with the US.¹

“Iran’s refusal to negotiate with the US,” Khamenei explained, stems from the realization that “negotiating with current US government is toxic.” It is through negotiations that “the US seeks to take Iran’s strengths away” - that is, have Iran unilaterally “surrender its defensive power” and “its strategic regional influence.” Khamenei described an American offer to discuss the range of Iran’s ballistic missiles. “Reduce the range so you would not be able to hit our bases,” the US demanded according to Khamenei. He emphasized that “talks on Iran’s strengths, including the missile power and regional influence [are] foolish.”

Khamenei was confident that “there was not going to be any war” between the US and Iran, and thus the confrontation would not be “a military one”. Khamenei stressed that “there will not be a military confrontation as neither Iran nor the US seeks war because the Americans know that the war will not be beneficial for them.” Under these circumstances, Iran will continue its surge relying on proxies - “the resistance” - as the main instrument for confronting all foes. “The resistance is Iran’s only absolute choice,” he emphasized. “The Iranian nation’s definite option will be resistance in the face of the US, and in this confrontation, the US would be forced into a retreat,” Khamenei explained. “Neither we nor they, who know war will not be in their interest, are after war.”

The Iranian nation is mobilized behind Tehran. Khamenei observed that “as a result of the US threats hatred towards the US among the Iranians has increased by more than ten times.”

Khamenei concluded by stating that “the Iranian military forces are more prepared and vigilant than ever.” He repeated that in pursuing its “policy of confrontation with the Islamic Republic too, the US will definitely suffer defeat, and [the outcome] will end up to our benefit.”

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Khamenei and official Tehran have every reason to be confident given the reaction of the US, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to the series of violent provocations against their oil infrastructure starting 6 May.

The first confirmed attack took place on 6 May in the Saudi Arabian port of Yanbu on the Red Sea. A number of powerful explosions rocked the port area and heavy black smoke billowed. Reportedly, an unmanned remote-controlled bomb-boat hit an oil loading pier - setting it and nearby facilities aflame. There were also unconfirmed reports that Yanbu was struck by rockets fired from the Red Sea.

Riyadh was able to suppress most reports through tight control over the electronic media.

On 8 May, a small cargo ship carrying about 6,000 gallons of diesel, 300 tires and 120 vehicles burst into flames in the Sharjah Port. All 13 crew members were rescued but the ship was completely destroyed. Arson

¹ For details see: Yossef Bodansky, The US-Iran Face-Off, ISPSW Issue No. 616, May 2019; Yossef Bodansky, Escalation – Iran Against the Regional Order, ISPSW Issue No. 614, April 2019; Yossef Bodansky, The New Bloc: “The Middle Eastern Entente”, ISPSW Issue No. 612, March 2019.



or sabotage are suspected because explosions were heard, and the fire started at three spots almost simultaneously and spread fast.

Once again, the Saudis helped the UAE authorities to quickly suppress most reporting.

On 12 May, four or five tankers were hit by underwater and/or near-waterline explosions near the port of Fujairah. Fujairah is the distribution end of the key oil and natural gas pipeline-corridor aimed to alleviate the need for tankers to use the Strait of Hormuz. Two Saudi tankers suffered "heavy structural damage" in the attack. Additional strikes were launched against oil tanks in the main tank farm - but these were blocked by the protective facilities so that the damage was minimal or negligible. The expert assessment is that the attacks were carried out by highly trained and well-equipped frogmen who most likely arrived from the Iranian side of the Gulf. The attackers were trained and equipped by members of the IRGC Special Forces - particularly the Sepah Navy Special Force - an independent Takavar unit of the IRGC Navy based on the Greater Farur Island in the Persian Gulf - and the Imam Hossein [Marines] Brigade based in Bandar Abbas.

As beforehand, even though multiple explosions were heard all over the area, the Fujairah authorities initially insisted that "there had been no fire or explosion at the port." This time however, the perpetrators were ready. The HizbAllah-linked Al-Mayadeen news channel aired a detailed report with maps, as well as the names and hull numbers of the attacked tankers. They were accurate. Al-Mayadeen and other Shiite outlets were persistent despite the initial denials, and ultimately the UAE had to acknowledge that "four commercial vessels" were hit by "acts of sabotage" at Fujairah. The next day, Saudi energy minister Khalid al-Falih conceded that two Saudi oil tankers suffered "significant damage" in the "apparent sabotage attack".

In the early morning hours of 14 May, seven "suicide" bomb-drones - most likely the Iranian Qasef-1 drones - slammed into two oil pumping stations in Dawadmi and Afeef, west of Riyadh. Fire broke out and put the stations out of order. Reconnaissance drones broadcasted images of the strike to the Sanaa area. The drones were controlled from IRGC-controlled facilities at the Sanaa Air Base. (Unconfirmed reports suggest that the drones were launched from the ABS airport in northwestern Yemen closer to the Saudi border.)

Saudi Arabia had to shut down the East-West Pipeline. The 1,200km/750mile pipeline carries about 5 million barrels of oil a day from the main oil fields in eastern Saudi Arabia to the port of Yanbu on the Red Sea.

The drone images were broadcasted almost live on the Houthi-aligned Masirah TV. A Houthi military official announced that "seven drones carried out attacks on vital Saudi installations ... in response to the continued aggression and blockade of our people and we are prepared to carry out more unique and harsh strikes." In an interview with the HizbAllah-affiliated Al-Manar TV, Muhammad Abdulsalam of the Houthi Ansarullah Movement claimed responsibility and promised more strategic attacks on both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. "Following Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's flagrant disregard for our demand to stop the onslaught and persistence on the blockade of Yemen, Yemeni forces launch attacks against targets in the heart of these countries [that are] high on their agenda." He also promised more strikes to come.

Indeed, also on 14 May, the Houthi forces fired a Badr-1 ballistic missile at an Aramco oil refinery in Saudi Arabia's Jizan Province. The next day, Al-Mayadeen broadcasted an extensive report about recent Houthi strategic strikes against Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and insisted that the number of such attacks is larger than publicly admitted. "We have received special information showing that the Yemeni forces in Sanaa have launched over ten undeclared military operations against vital targets in the depth of Saudi Arabia," Al-Mayadeen said.



Throughout, there has been a marked escalation of the shooting and sabotage clashes with Shiite Jihadists in eastern Saudi Arabia, especially the Qatif area, and neighboring Gulf States. In principle, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi acknowledge clashes only when the security forces suffer fatalities. Other incidents are concealed.

However, these incidents are sufficient for Riyadh to secretly declare an emergency in the entire al-Sharqiyah (eastern) region. According to Saudi opposition leaders, Riyadh ordered full mobilization of all Ground Forces and National Guard units. They published an order issued by Col. Muhammad bin Nasser al-Harbi, a Ground Forces commander in al-Sharqiyah, that all forces be put on high alert within the next 72 hours. As well, National Guard Forces were dispatched to al-Sharqiyah from central Saudi Arabia in order to protect oil wells, refineries and oil ports. All leaves were cancelled.

Official Tehran denied any association with the "mischief" across the Gulf, and even hinted at Israeli false flag provocations aimed to drag the US into war against Iran.

However, as located and translated by MEMRI, several Iranian senior journalists from IRGC-affiliated organs identified the perpetrators in their Tweets. On 12 May, Amin Arabshahi, the director of the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim news agency in Khorasan Province, tweeted about the importance of Fujairah as "the sole lifeline for the export of oil from the UAE and Saudi Arabia," and added that "The guys of the Islamic Resistance set fire" to the port. The US "should know that the war started years ago. We are in its final moments."

Also on 12 May, Hamed Rahim-Pour, the editor of the international section of the IRGC-affiliated Khorasan Daily, noted that "All our options are on the table" in the aftermath of the attacks on both Yanbu and Fujairah. The oil exported through these two ports is meant "to replace Iranian oil! They received such a blow that they didn't understand where it came from!" On 14 May, he addressed the coming escalation. "The scope of the [US] war against Iran should not be defined only by gigantic US aircraft carriers, or [its] strategic bombers stationed in Qatar, or the F-35 fighter planes. The range and scope of the possible war against Iran may be defined by quiet infiltrations at Fujairah, Yanbu and Golan, and dozens of other points in the region."

Also on 14 May, Hesameddin Ashena, a senior political adviser to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, responded to a Tweet from President Trump. "You wanted a better deal with Iran. Looks like you are going to get a war instead. That's what happens when you listen to the mustache. Good luck in 2020!"

Ultimately, and even if for only a short time, Iran and its proxies were able to shut down completely the oil exports of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States from non-Strait of Hormuz venues. With the viable Iranian threat to shipping via the Strait of Hormuz undisputed - Tehran proved its point: Iran can shut down the export of oil from the entire Arabian Peninsula.

Tehran's overall approach is based on the "war on oil" doctrine adopted back in the summer of 2005. Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, then the Expediency Council Chairman and Iran's most influential strategist, articulated the importance of a national oil war strategy. He called for a comprehensive war plan - a 'Big Bang' strategy - that will drastically alter the strategic posture in the Middle East and the global confrontation with the US-led West by depriving the West of stable oil supplies. The "war on oil" was adopted as the national strategy by then President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad. The strategy is still valid.

The strategy is based on a three tier/ring approach. The first Tier/Ring - The Core - aims to attack and disrupt the production and transporting of oil and gas in the areas immediately surrounding Iran. Tehran plans on implementing its contingency plans through various forces - from overt and covert acts of war by Iranian forces to a myriad of terrorist strikes and covert operations by a web of both Shiite and Sunni Islamist-Jihadist



groups. The main missions of the Iranian forces and their proxies include blocking the Strait of Hormuz and destroying oil installations in the Persian Gulf, sinking tankers in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, shelling oil installations in the eastern parts of the Arabian Peninsula (should terrorism fail), and covertly assisting Iraqi forces in destroying Iraq's energy infrastructure. The special training programs that were established in winter 2005/6 to facilitate implementation of the "war on oil" have vastly expanded since then.

The region's states are cognizant of the Iranian grand designs and Tehran's determination to implement them. Even Iran's closest allies dread the consequences of a major escalation in a clash with the US. Hence, on 12 May, Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdulrahman al-Thani went to Tehran on what was supposed to be a secret visit. According to Qatari senior officials, he came "to help head off the deepening crisis between the US, Iran and regional powers." He offered Zarif to "open new avenues to resolve the growing crisis between Iran and the United States and ease the volatile situation" before it was too late. Acknowledging the importance of the new bloc, al-Thani promised to work out modalities for preventing the US from using the Al-Udeid air base. He pleaded for time to defuse Washington, and urged Tehran to refrain from escalating the war on oil in the near future - particularly in the Persian Gulf area.

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In Tehran, there remains an unresolved issue: How to handle the US forces deployed throughout the Middle East, and not just in the Persian Gulf area. Indeed, US forces take active part in blocking the advance of Iranian and Iran-Proxy forces in Syria, Iraq and increasingly Yemen. US forces train and equip local proxies that clash with Iran's Shiite militias. In many cases, the US provides heavy artillery and air support to proxy forces in both Syria and Iraq when they confront Shiite militias.

The question arose back in early April, once Tehran committed to escalating the confrontation with Saudi Arabia, including toppling the House of al-Saud. Until the spring of 2019, the Iranians and their proxies were extremely cautious when confronting US forces - but the anticipated assertiveness necessitated a new policy. By mid-April, the multitude of the Iranian and Iran-Proxy operations envisaged by Qods Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani and his staff strongly suggested the possibility of localized friction with US forces throughout the greater Middle East. Having consulted with the uppermost leadership in Tehran, Soleimani instructed that Iranian and Iran-Proxy forces can clash with US forces if they operate as a trip-wire aimed to prevent Iranian operations and Iran's ascent, and if the US forces actively support (especially by artillery and air strikes) local anti-Iran forces. The reverberations of this decision were the crux of the intelligence warnings the US received from Israel.

By early May, Tehran became even more confident in its ability to withstand localized fighting with US forces. On 28/29 April, the Turkish military killed an American soldier in Kobane, northern Syria. He was a member of the 101st Airborne Division. He was killed while with the US-sponsored predominantly Kurdish SDF. The Turkish military attacked the Kurdish positions. The next day, the US only rushed to conceal the incident and did not even protest the Turkish attack on the Kurdish forces.

Hence, Soleimani and IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami decided to further revisit the restraining orders on the Iranian and Iran-Proxy forces. Given the high stakes involved - the fateful Iranian surge into regional prominence throughout the greater Middle East - Soleimani and Salami concluded that the risk of friction and localized clashes was warranted. Khamenei agreed with the IRGC commanders and endorsed their penchant for audacity. With a stronger mandate from Khamenei, Soleimani has been traveling



in Iraq and Syria since early May - coordinating with his allies and proxies the next moves.

In lieu of Khamenei's instructions, the Iranian surge will keep expanding and escalating. Tehran is capitalizing on the need for Iranian and Iran-Proxy forces in Idlib as the Syrian offensive escalates. Tehran is also emboldened by the growing vulnerability and coming implosion of Saudi Arabia as a result of the new purges by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman al-Saud. Indeed, Saudi opposition concluded after 10 May that Saudi Arabia cannot face Iran successfully. A study by current and former Saudi senior officials stated that "Saudi Arabia is not prepared for an international confrontation with Iran, because the economy, military, and internal front [the tribal population] are not in the support of the government." Tehran obtained a copy of the study. Hence, as Iran is getting more audacious and assertive, the likelihood of a clash with US forces is growing.

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This is because of the latest developments in Sochi, Russia. On 13 May, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov hosted in Sochi Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. They discussed key issues pertaining to the two countries. Lavrov and Wang Yi resolved "to strengthen the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination between the two countries."

A key issue was addressing the brewing US-Iranian crisis in the Persian Gulf. Russia and China decided not to permit the US to topple the Mullahs' regime in Tehran and effect a regime change. Both countries agree that the long-term vital interests of both countries demand the preserving of a friendly loyal Iran as a crucial element in the New Silk Road and the consolidation of the Eurasian Sphere. According to Russian and Chinese senior officials, in the secret part of their talks, Lavrov and Wang Yi decided to give Iran "guarantees" of support in the event the US moved to strangulate Iran and attempt a regime change. "The bottom line," the senior officials asserted, is that "Russia-China will not allow Iran to be destroyed." Significantly, Lavrov consulted with President Vladimir Putin before committing to the joint guarantees with Wang Yi.

According to the Chinese senior officials, before leaving Beijing, Wang Yi was provided with expert studies about Iran. A study of Iran's economy concluded that "Self-sufficiency helps Iran counter sanctions" and thus there is no danger of imminent collapse. A study by the Chinese General Staff and Military Intelligence concluded that "the US cannot afford war against Iran, but it likely to play intimidation." The authors warned that "Washington does over-estimate its control over this risky process and seriously underestimate the determination of countries to defend their core interests." Another Military study warned that Beijing should "not underestimate US warlike tradition as it is essentially a dangerous nation." Hence there is the danger of an eruption of violence unless the US is contained and restrained.

These studies convinced the prudent Forbidden City to join the Kremlin in adopting a strong policy and agree to guarantee Iran's survival. The uppermost leaders in Tehran were immediately notified on the Russian-Chinese "guarantees".

On 14 May, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had meetings in Sochi with Putin and Lavrov. They held lengthy and largely unfriendly discussions on a host of issues both countries strongly disagree on. According to the Russian senior officials, both Putin and Lavrov expressed Russia's strong opposition to the US activities in the Persian Gulf and reiterated the Russian and Chinese commitment to the regime in Tehran. Pompeo



shrugged the Russian position and emphasized the US resolve to address the Iranian threats resolutely. After Pompeo left Sochi, Russian presidential aide Yury Ushakov quipped that the discussion on Iran was “interesting”.

Meanwhile, Tehran's take on the reports from Sochi is that the US will not give up on the confrontation with Iran but that Russia and China will prevent an Iranian defeat even if there are major setbacks. Under such conditions, Iran can be more assertive and audacious even at a higher risk of escalation.

Hence, on the night of 15 May, senior commanders made sudden assertions in closed meetings with senior officers about Iran's readiness for an imminent fateful war.

Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami conveyed confidence and pragmatism. “Today the Islamic Republic of Iran stands at the peak of defense-military preparedness to counter any threat or act of aggression,” he said. He believes that US setbacks in the Syria-Iraq theater are the reason for the sudden crisis. “The defeat of the recent Takfiri-terrorist current in the region, in particular in Iraq and Syria, dealt a heavy blow to the image of ... the US and the regional governments sponsoring terrorists, and after this malicious plot failed the Americans embarked on waging a severe, all-out war on our nation through using economic tools.” Once sanctions failed, the US moved to a military confrontation. Whatever the cost, Hatami concluded, “the Iranian nation” will “defeat the American-Zionist front.”

IRGC Commander Salami sees an historic turning point in the current crisis and war. “We are on the cusp of a full-scale confrontation with the enemy,” he said. “The Islamic Republic is at the most decisive moment of its history because of enemy pressure.” He delved on this aspect. “This moment in history - because the enemy has stepped into the field of confrontation with us with all the possible capacity - is the most decisive moment of the Islamic Revolution,” Salami reiterated. “This war is not against the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it's against the Iranian nation.”

Meanwhile, Qods Force Commander Soleimani continues to travel around, consulting with his commanders - both Iranians and Proxies - and preparing them for the next phase of the historic surge of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

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